

Northern Missions See Fulfillment of a Dream

In Catholic papers recently, and particularly in The Canadian Register, the news has broken that, in all its parts, the Church in Canada has come of age! For that is the meaning when a mission church becomes a fully-titled diocese of the Church. It is a very heartening thing to find that the tremendous apostolic work of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate has now reached the place where these new dioceses, formerly vicariates apostolic, can now stand on their own feet, or at least can do so in large part.

In the 1960 Le Canada Ecclesiastique we find the following listed as vicariates apostolic: Whitehorse, Prince Rupert, Mackenzie, Grouard, Keewatin, Hudson Bay, James Bay, and Labrador. At that time the Bishops in charge were Oblates and, for the most part, the missionaries were always Oblates.

As the news item told us, Grouard becomes the Archdiocese of McLennan with Archbishop Routhier as Metropolitan. Under this Archdiocese come the dioceses of Prince Rupert (Bishop Fergus J. O'Grady) and Whitehorse (Bishop James F. Mulvihill). Another Archdiocese is that of Keewatin-LePas, with Churchill (formerly Hudson Bay) (Bishop Mark Lacroix), Moosonee (formerly James Bay) (Bishop Jules Leguerrier) and Labrador-Schefferville (Bishop Henry Legare).

In Our First issue of « Our Heritage » (Jan. 28, 1967) page 5, we gave a very brief outline of mis-

sionary work in these various vicariates apostolic. It is not our intention to repeat here what we have already outlined but it may be well to note certain things with regard to the history of all these missions, most of which even today are Eskimo and Indian missions.

For many years it was almost an impossibility for the Catholic Church to find a foothold in the entire Canadian Northwest. The Hudson's Bay Company was in complete charge by their Charter of 1670 and utterly opposed the coming of Catholic missionaries.

In 1860 the Oblates founded the St. Peter mission at Reindeer Lake. Perhaps the first missionary among the Eskimo was a Father Petitot and it might be good here just simply to quote from his own impressions of his first beginning. We cannot possibly tell the story of this missionary or of the many others nor can we tell the story in our few pages of the great work done throughout the entire Northwest. But to return to Father Petitot:

« I found myself transported before one of the most retarded and most abandoned people on earth, in the middle of the nation living closest to the North Pole, the most paradoxical nation and one most ignorant of our beliefs, customs and habits ».

« I had read all the chronicles of Arctic explorers who had preceded me and since my childhood I had thoroughly familiarized myself with the Eskimo people. I thought I knew their way of life and yet, I found I had to amend many of my judgments upon my first encounter with them. Simply seeing a few Eskimo and spending an hour in their company told me more than any amount of reading could ».

« Such were my thoughts as I crawled through the low and narrow passage that led to the igloo all the while protecting my hands and knees from the filth that littered this primitive anteroom ».

So he began his work. In 1868 Father Gaste spent three months among the Eskimos in the interior of the Barren Lands. He had the immediate consolation of beginning a friendship between the Indian, the Eskimo, and the Oblates. His mission was not long. Perhaps we could go back a little to emphasize the point that the Indian Missions had been begun earlier than the dates mentioned about the Eskimo Missions. When Bishop Tache succeeded Bishop Provencher in 1853 he had under him the Mission of St. Anne, 45 miles west of Edmonton, St. John the Baptist at Ile a la Crosse, and the Nativity on Lake Athabasca, each of which had a number of dependencies periodically visited by the priests stationed at the main missions.

When Bishop Tache assumed charge of the Catholic West, he had four secular priests, Thibault, Beurassa, LaFleche and Lacombe (this latter became an Oblate) and seven Oblates, Bermond, Faraud, Grollier, Tissot, Maisonneuve, Vegreville and Remas. One of the first thing the new Bishop did was to send Father Grollier to found a mission at the eastern end of Lake Athabasca. This became known as Fond du Lac and in the fall of 1853 Lac La Biche was established by Father Remas in the midst of extreme poverty.

In August 1854 Bishop Tache received a priest lately ordained who, in spite of his frail health, was to become a great figure in the annals of the Canadian Northwest. This was Father Vital J. Grandin, OMI (became Bishop 1859), who brought with him to St. Boniface Christian Brothers whose sojourn there was to be but too short. To install them, and himself to take formal possession of his see, Bishop Tache returned to St. Boniface. In May 1855 was commenced the construction of a college building measuring 60 feet by 34 feet, which was soon to shelter 58 pupils.

Meanwhile Father Grandin was sent to Lake Athabasca to allow Father Faraud time to spy out the

land on behalf of the missions, while Father Lacombe, on the eve of becoming an Oblate, was visiting Lesser Slave Lake and Peace River. A new recruit, Father J. M. Lestanc, who arrived on Oct. 19, 1855, brought the number of Oblate priests in the diocese of St. Boniface up to ten; but the secular priests therein decreased in number, and by the end of 1856 only one, Father Thibault, remained in the country.

Bishop Tache seemed to be attracted by the North as the needle is by the magnetic pole. In 1855-56 we see him again going from mission to mission, and comforting the priests, whose extreme penury and consequent sufferings he was only too pleased to share. As an instance of the practical results of their common exertions we may mention that at that time the mission of Ile a la Crosse was composed of 534 excellent Christians, with 53 catechumens out of a total population of 735.

The life of the northern missionaries was for the most part of necessity spent in travelling, sometimes following up the Metis and Indians in their buffalo hunts, but more often going from fort to fort in order to meet the natives who congregated there to exchange their furs for supplies, as well as to hear the Word of God and approach the sacraments. So poor were the missionaries in the Far North that during the winter they had to adopt the costume of their flocks. This consisted of long trousers of moose skin, a shirt of caribou skin with the hair inside, over which hung a large blouse of moose skin leather. Two small bags of bear or other skin hung from either shoulder. These were their mittens, in which they had constantly to keep their hands or pay the penalty of having them immediately frozen. Over their heads they wore skin hoods enclosing fur caps. In spite of all these precautions many were the cheeks and noses that became the prey of the biting cold.

It was under such winter conditions that Bishop Grandin made an apostolic visit to the northern mis-

sions that lasted over three years (1861-64). Everywhere he was struck by the extreme poverty of the missionaries and the marked improvement in the lives of their converts. This improvement was all the more noticeable as it contrasted with the morals of those tribes which had but lately accepted their ministrations and which still abandoned the old and infirm, and occasionally practised cannibalism in times of famine.

In addition to their sacred duties his priests had generally to stoop to the most menial occupations and live in the greatest penury. Thus, at Good Hope, to mention only one station, Father Seguin was the regular hunter and purveyor of the mission, Brother Kearney was the carpenter and mason, while the travelling bishop constituted himself the woodman of the establishment until the weather became mild enough for him to go on with his visitations. At the same mission Father Grollier was dying in his prime, and completing by his sufferings the conversion of the natives to whom his life had been consecrated.

It is impossible to follow the prelate in all his journeyings. Only one incident of these travels shall we relate, in order to give the reader an idea of the dangers which beset the lives of the northern missionaries. This occurred on Dec. 14, 1863. Bishop Grandin was travelling over the ice of the inland sea called Great Slave Lake, closely preceded by some traders connected with the Hudson's Bay Company. The party were not far from their destination, namely, St. Joseph's Mission, when suddenly they were struck by a squall of wind which in a few moments increased to a fierce gale. At the same time a fine snow fell, which whipped the faces of the wayfarers and soon concealed everything from view. Yet the ice was left quite bare by the fierceness of the wind, so that the bishop and his guide Baptiste, a child of 13, could not see the tracks of their companions, and lost their way. The Indian guide of the traders, who knew

that the prelate was doomed if left alone, begged his party to wait for him; but the bitter cold and the inexperience of northern blizzards caused them to pay no heed to his remonstrances.

Bishop and child were now walking around at random, simply to keep themselves from freezing. Both were soon exhausted. They knew the consequences of inaction in the midst of such a storm, but human endurance has its limits. Lying down to leeward of his sledge and pressing the child to his bosom, the bishop gave his life up for lost, and begged for God's mercy. Then he heard the confession of little Baptiste, while the child wept in spite of himself, and the dogs howled under the sting of the bitter cold. Humanly speaking, they were doomed. Once asleep, they would have awakened only to appear before God's tribunal.

Yet, through a purely providential protection, they both saw the light of the morrow. Early in the morning they were rescued by a party sent from the mission and the fort, and Bishop Grandin entered the mission chapel as Father Petitot, a new arrival who was destined to become the great scientist of the Arctic was saying Mass for him, and wondering whether it was not a requiem Mass that he ought to be celebrating.

In previous numbers, particularly in January, March, April and May issues of « Our Heritage », we had more information on the Oblate Fathers and their missions in the West and naturally we would like to refer back to these articles.

One particular person, though his missions were in British Columbia, merits an article to himself for the work he did in making the Indian capable of reading. This same priest also wrote a history of the Catholic Church in the West. His name is Father A. G. Morice. The work of Father Le-Jeune also requires some study and the names of the early

bishops, Grandin, Grouard, Faraud, Charlebois, Turquetil are too illustrious to be completely forgotten.

They and many others made the missions of the West and North. The feeble pen of the human writer cannot do full justice either to them or their successors. But how they must rejoice that their work done in a pioneering way in poverty and in misery, cold and heat, apathy and hatred, has now reached its crown in the hierarchical system of our Church!

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